NO MORE EXCUSES

THE FINAL REPORT OF THE HISPANIC DROPOUT PROJECT

Hispanic Dropout Project Members

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Dear Secretary Riley:

It is with a sense of great urgency that I forward to you the final report of the Hispanic Dropout Project, *No More Excuses*. With this report, we have fulfilled the charge that you gave to us in our letters of appointment to the project and at our meeting on September 18, 1995.

Since we first met with you, thousands of this nation's Hispanic students have left school without a diploma. Some left because they felt that other life options were more viable; others left because they felt that they were being pushed out; and still others left because of family obligations. Yet almost all these students left school because no one had established individual relationships with each of them, communicated high academic expectations to them, and provided them with meaningful opportunities to achieve those expectations.

We mourn their truncated education. We worry about their future lives, their unfulfilled dreams and aspirations, their access to this nation's most cherished democratic institutions, and their full participation in the economic, labor, social, and other spheres of life. We share with you a concern for the impact of their inadequate education on this nation's economic and social systems. And we are outraged at the conditions that made possible such a shocking state of affairs in the first place.

In our report to you, we note that parents, teachers, and other school personnel have central roles in supporting this nation's Hispanic youth to complete school and to have a worthwhile education in doing so. What is more, we outline steps that need to be taken by policy makers, the business community, and the larger voting public to support the work of our nation's schools in educating and graduating their Hispanic youth. These efforts will require a concerted and long-term investment of human and fiscal resources; the problem of Hispanic school dropout will not be solved within an election cycle nor within a time frame that lends itself easily to political grandstanding and sound bite news reporting.

For all of us in the project, it has been an honor to serve the nation in this effort. What is more, we feel an obligation to the countless people who shared their expertise with us, who testified at our open hearings, and who hosted our visits to sites around the country. We feel an even stronger obligation to the younger siblings of the dropouts with whom we spoke and, in general, to all Hispanic students whose educational experiences are less than what should be their due in a nation that prides itself on the treatment of its children. We stand prepared to support meaningful follow up to this project. The time for excuses is over; there is much work to be done.

Sincerely yours,

Walter G. Secada
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University of Wisconsin-Madison
Director, Hispanic Dropout Project

Contents

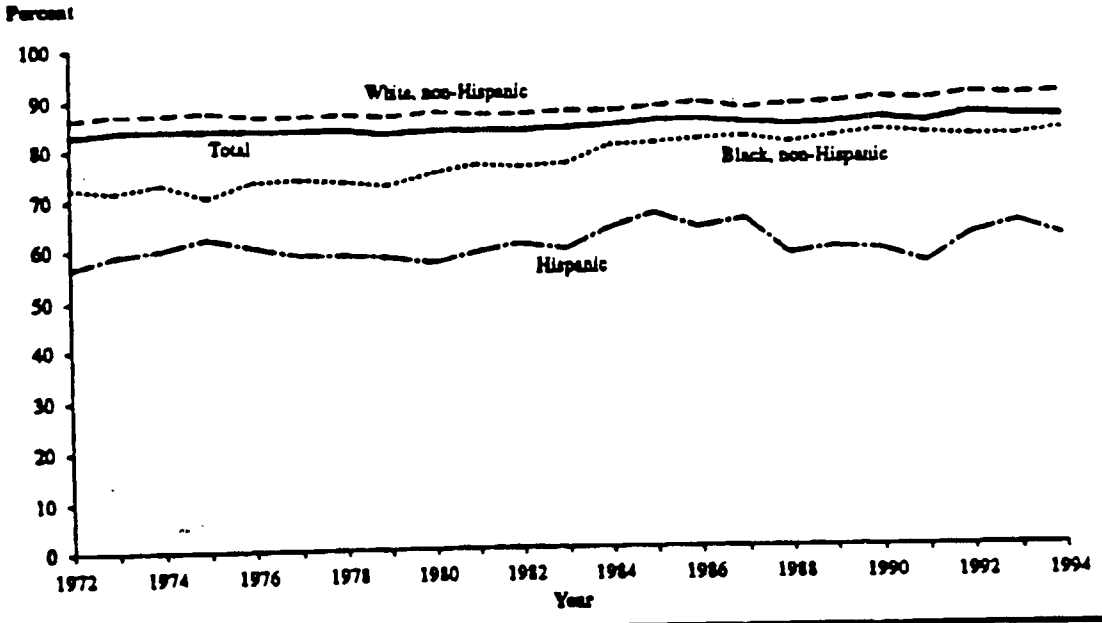
The material in this report that is marked by the icon at left or that is boxed represents the views of those we heard in the field and the knowledge of those whose work we consulted.

BACKGROUND

Nearly one in five of our nation's Hispanics between the ages of 16 and 24 who ever enrolled in a United States school left school without either a high school diploma or an alternative certificate such as a GED, according to the most recently available data from the United States Census Bureau. If we consider all of this nation's Hispanics, including immigrants who never enrolled in U.S. schools, the Hispanic dropout rate reaches a staggering 30 percent. While accounting for just 56 percent of all U.S. immigrants, Hispanics account for nearly 90 percent of all immigrant dropouts.

While the dropout rate for other school-aged populations has declined, more or less steadily, over the last 25 years, the overall Hispanic dropout rate started higher and has remained between 30 and 35 percent during that same time period. As a result, today's dropout rate for Hispanics is 2.5 times the rate for blacks and 3.5 times the rate for white non-Hispanics. Moreover, of Hispanics who have ever enrolled in U.S. schools, proportionately more of them seek alternative high school diplomas than do whites; that is, they may get high school diplomas, but even Hispanics who get diplomas are more likely to leave school in order to do so.[1] The situation is far more serious than any of these odds and rates suggest because they apply to a rapidly growing number of our nation's students.

High school completion rates for all 18- through 24-year-olds, by race–ethnicity: October 1972 through October 1994

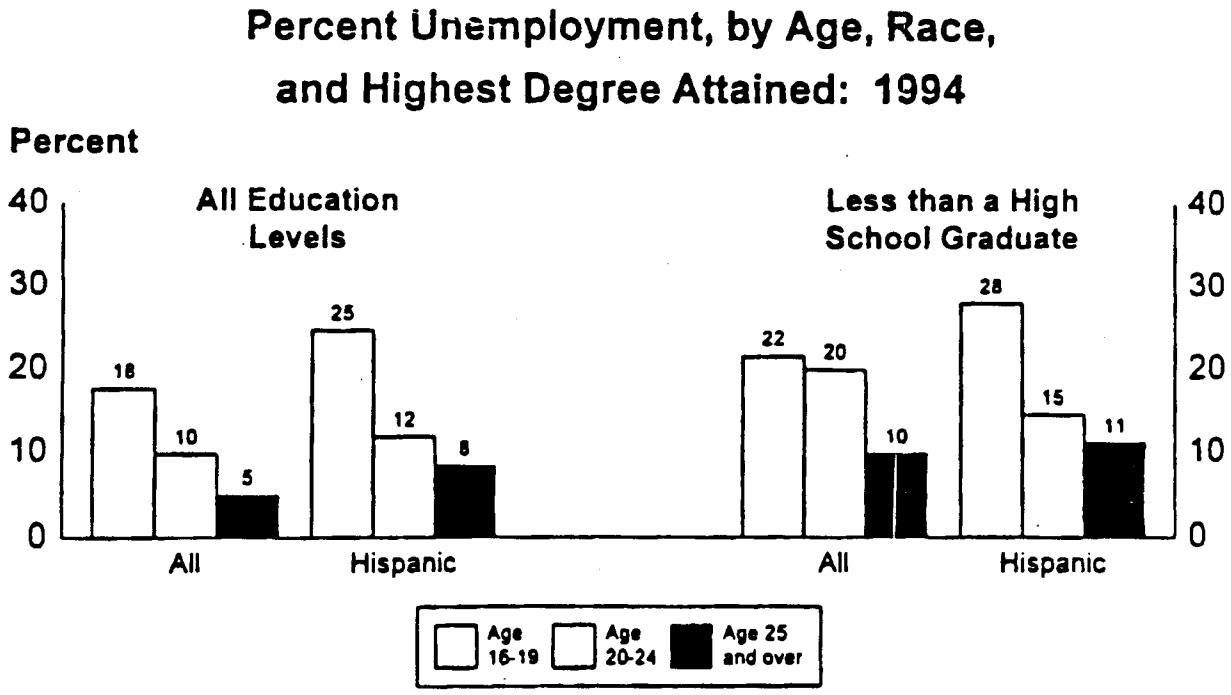


SOURCE: U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, Current Population Survey, October (various years), unpublished data.

As with other students, the odds of school completion rise for Hispanics with gains in factors such as family income and parent education. Nevertheless, reports and studies document that gaps in school completion rates between Hispanic and non-Hispanic students remain even after controlling for the social class background of students, for their language proficiency, and for their immigrant status. *Regardless of your position in society, if you are an Hispanic student, you are more likely to drop out of school and not earn a diploma than if you are a non-Hispanic American in a similar position.*[2]

For students, dropping out forecloses a lifetime of opportunities—and in turn makes it far more likely that their own children will grow up in poverty and be placed at risk. For business, this means a lack of high-skilled employees, fewer entrepreneurs, and poorer markets. For communities, this cumulates the risk of civic breakdown. The high-wage low-skill factory jobs that lifted generations of Americans from poverty and empowered them to buy homes, send their children to college, and take care of themselves and their families are little more than a memory in our age of the silicon chip and global economy. In economic progress, as in strategic security, education is truly America's first line of defense. In other words, *the career and employment prospects for dropouts are dismal.*

Hispanic dropouts are more likely to be unemployed.



Source: NCES, *Digest of Education Statistics*, 1995.

> *"Those who do not complete high school face difficulties in making successful steps in other transitions to adult life."* In National Center for Education Statistics, *Dropout Rates in the United States: 1994* (NCES 96-863), p. 51. Washington, DC: United States Department of Education

As Thomas Jefferson said, education is the anvil of democracy. More than ever before, democracy depends not on 30-second sound bites from politicians on the cutting edge of rhetoric, but on an informed citizenry who can see through the spin and choose effective options to solve our nation's problems. From toxic waste to environmental protection to economic progress, understanding these issues is fundamental. Dropouts have among the lowest voting rates and among the lowest levels of civic participation. Lack of an informed, active citizenry is dangerous to the American prospect.

According to the United States Census Bureau, Hispanics are projected to become the largest ethnic minority in the United States by the early twenty-first century. If our country stays on its current path, the low rate of Hispanic school completion means that a large segment of the country's soon-to-be largest minority group will be underprepared for employment, for making personal choices, and for engagement in civic life as is required for this democracy to grow and adapt as the founders intended it to. Dropouts diminish our democracy, our society, and their own opportunities.

"Students...see dropping out as wrong; they see it as representing failure, a problem. This is of interest because it tells us that these Latino students (who are still in school) do not want to drop out. This counters the assumption of many who argue that Latinos are not really very interested in finishing school."
In Rodriguez, C. E. (1992). *Student voices: High school students' perspectives on the Latino dropout problem* (pp. 89-90). (Report to the Latino Commission on Educational Reform). New York: Fordham University.

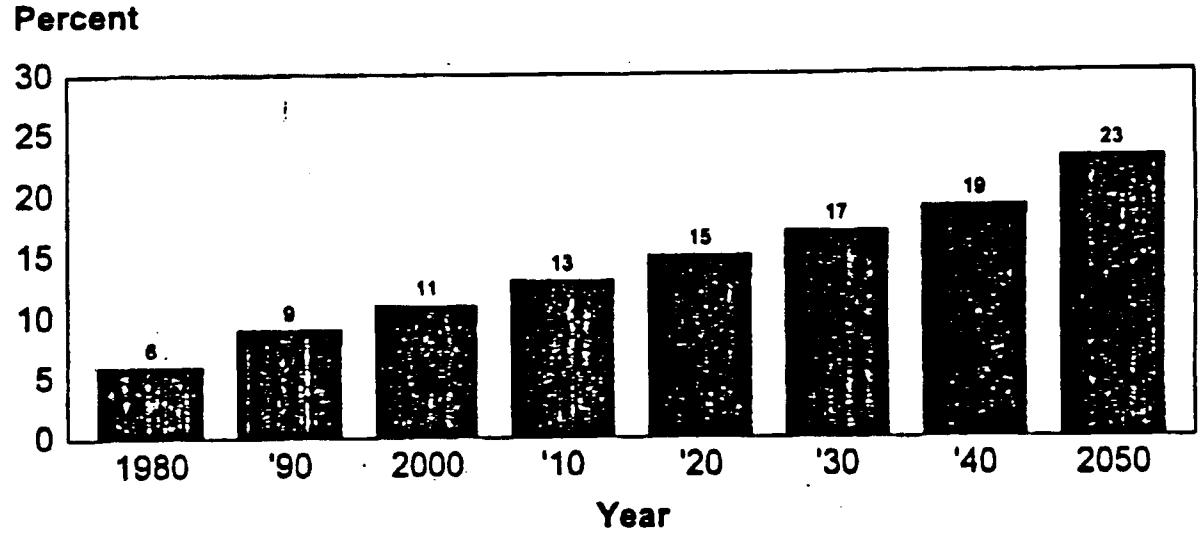
Dropping out is not a random act. According to some observers, school dropout is the logical outcome of the social forces that limit Hispanics' roles in society. Many Hispanic students live in the nation's most economically distressed areas. They attend overcrowded schools in physical disrepair and with limited educational materials. They see the devastating effects of their elders' limited employment opportunities and job ceilings. Hispanic students encounter stereotypes, personal prejudice, and social bias that is often part of larger anti-immigrant forces in this society. For many Hispanics, the United States does not appear to be a society of opportunities. Not surprisingly—faced with evidence of lingering institutional bias against Hispanics—these students figure: *The American Dream is not for me. Why bother?* And, of course, they drop out.

Hispanic school dropout has been portrayed as all of the above, and more. Although various aspects of this crisis have been highlighted by different researchers and writers, all agree on one thing: *The Hispanic dropout rate is shockingly and unacceptably high.*

If the nation does nothing, this unacceptable state of affairs can only worsen. The Census reports that because of demographic growth there will be at least a million more elementary students—many of them Hispanic—in our schools by the end of the decade. Without quick and concerted intervention, technology, trade, and changing policy will increase the number of children, many of them Hispanic, growing in poverty. Without adequate funding that is *effectively* used—particularly in the high-poverty schools attended by many Hispanic children—classes will become

Hispanics were about one of every ten Americans in 1990—and may be one of every five in 2050.

Hispanics as a Percent of Total Population: 1980 to 2050



Note: These projections come from the middle of three series of projections.

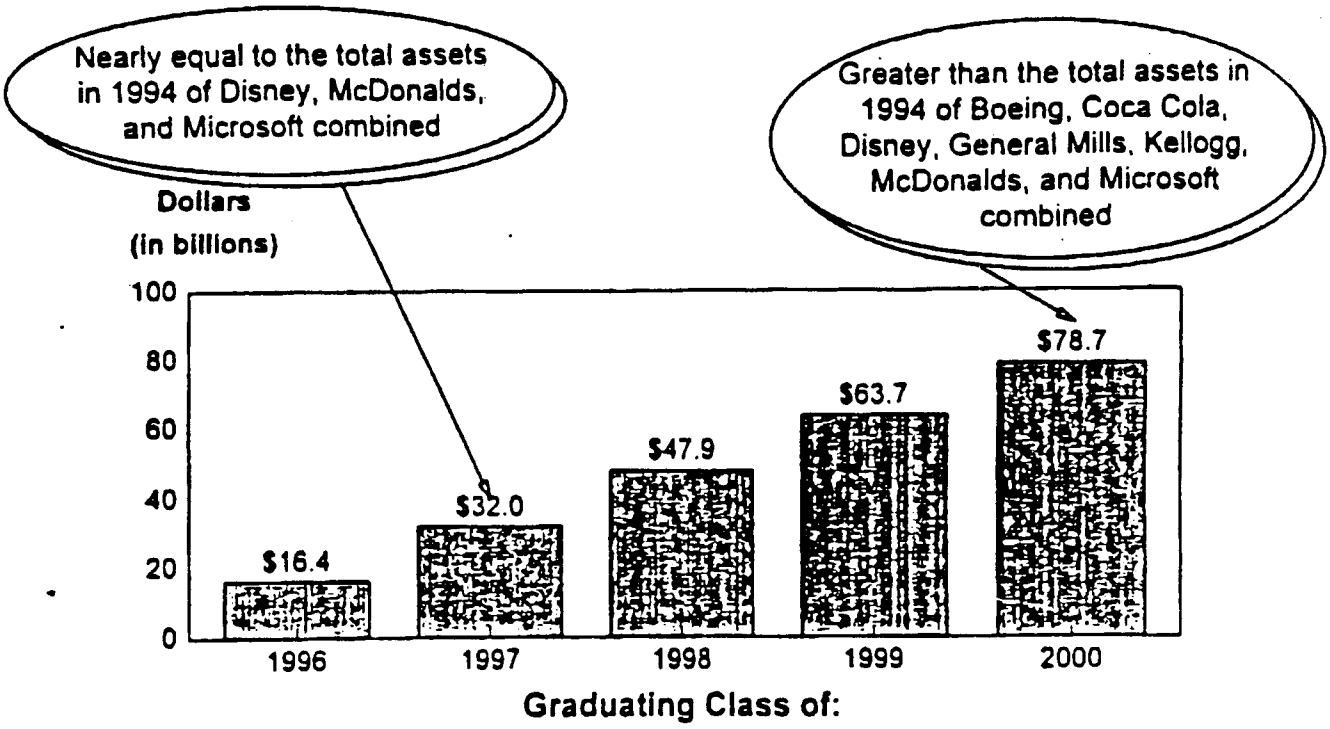
Source: Bureau of the Census, *Population Projections of the United States, by Age, Sex, Race, and Hispanic Origin: 1992 to 2050*, 1992, and Bureau of the Census, *Statistical Abstract of the United States: 1995*, 1995.

even more overcrowded than we have witnessed recently, instructional materials will be increasingly out-of-date, and schools' ability to attract and hold effective teachers will decrease. Although connection between students and their teachers and role models is important, the number of minority college students entering teaching is declining. There are shortages of teachers with meaningful proficiency in more than English. The retirement of the large proportion of current teachers originally hired to teach the baby boomers will intensify attrition of the teachers with the most classroom experience.

If the same proportion of Hispanic students is still dropping out tomorrow, America will have many more dropouts—at a time when education is crucial for employability. America's young people are not going away. If they drop out at the rates that their older siblings do today, the consequences to this nation and its institutions will be devastating.

This is also an opportunity to make a difference. We know much about what works and can build on this know-how. Effective teaching and schools change lives. Support and professional skills development for today's teachers and for the large number of teachers who must be hired in the next handful of years can make much of the difference.

If all Hispanic students completed high school, the lifetime earnings gain would be large.



Source: Department of Labor, *Report on the American Workforce*, 1994, and the "BusinessWeek 1000," BusinessWeek, March 27, 1995.

The Hispanic Dropout Project

In September 1995, United States Secretary of Education Richard W. Riley invited seven individuals to take part in a special project to study issues related to the problem of Hispanic student dropout. The secretary's charge to the Hispanic Dropout Project—as this effort came to be known—incorporated three broad goals: (a) to increase public awareness about the issues of Hispanic dropout; (b) to develop a policy-relevant set of recommendations at local, state, and federal levels addressed to school personnel, families, community, business, and other stakeholder groups; and (c) to support the development of a network of stakeholders interested in this issue to support actions taken after the project ended. Because the Hispanic Dropout Project is not a federal commission, we were not invited to make recommendations addressed to the federal government. In spite of this limitation on the project's scope of work, we realize that many recommendations are more likely to be implemented with supporting action by the federal government, as well as by state and local governments, school districts, businesses, community groups, and other interested parties.

Final Report

This report constitutes the Hispanic Dropout Project's culminating activity. It is intended to raise public awareness of the issues of Hispanic student dropout. This report contains our findings and recommendations at local, state, and national levels, and is addressed to school personnel, families, and community, business, and other stakeholder groups.

Throughout the entire project, we tried to reflect the knowledge and views of the various individuals and constituency groups that hosted our site visits, provided witness to what is happening in our nation's schools, and participated in our open discussions on these matters. With their varied experiences and broad range of views, these students, parents, teachers, volunteers, social service and business representatives, and other concerned citizens have been working on improving the education of Hispanic students. Their actions and words breathe life into the stolid statistics found in so many research studies. They make the facts matter.

"My parents sacrificed a lot for me. That's why I want to make good. For my kids to start somewhere higher than I did." Student leader at HDP student leader forum, New York City

What we saw and what people told us confirmed what well-established research has also found: Popular stereotypes—which would place the blame for school dropout on Hispanic students, their families, and language background, and that would allow people to shrug their shoulders as if to say that this was an enormous, insoluble problem or one that would go away by itself—are just plain wrong.

"I got throwed out, mainly." Arnie (former 10th-grade student). In Cairns, R. B., & Cairns, B. D. (1994). *Lifelines and risks: Pathways of youth in our time* (p.167). New York: Cambridge University Press.

We in the Hispanic Dropout Project developed a new appreciation for Yogi Berra's "*déjà vu, all over again.*" Much of what we have to report to America is *not* new. The roots of our findings run deep through the decades of extensive research gathered in many parts of the nation (see Appendix E for a bibliography). Much of the work on the education of at-risk and disadvantaged students, and dropout prevention applies; but then, so does much of the work on effective schools, school restructuring, school finance, and equity. Over the years, many of our findings have been repeated by Hispanic and non-Hispanic researchers, practitioners, and advocacy groups.

What troubles us and adds to our collective impatience in submitting this report is precisely that so much of this has appeared so often in the research literature and has been urged so often by those who care about student outcomes. Yet the nation has failed to put this knowledge to work in more than a few sites. There are lighthouses and beacons of excellence, yet policymakers and schools keep missing the message, sailing through the daily grind of ineffective and alienating practices, and piling up on the shoals of failure. Our nation's children, its most valuable resource

for its future, pay the price. We have tried to mix research that identifies what works in preventing school dropout with our other activities and to synthesize our findings in a form that can provide a basis for concerted action.

"Dropping out is sometimes a healthy response to an intolerable situation."
Speaker at HDP hearings, San Antonio

We were also struck by the misinformation and myths about Hispanic dropouts. These myths excuse inaction by turning children, parents, and their communities into victims so that educators dare not aspire to Hispanics' achieving educational excellence lest they be accused of blaming the victim. These myths also excuse inaction by demonizing Hispanic students and dropouts, their families, teachers, schools, districts, the state, business, and the community—thereby undermining the basis for teamwork. The stereotype that demonizes Hispanics raises the question: What can be accomplished with a demon who cannot or will not understand, who does not want to learn, who is antisocial and untrustworthy, and who just doesn't care?

"College is for the good, American persons, but not for me. I didn't think that I could have part of the American dream." Student testimony, Albuquerque

One goal of this report is to debunk these stereotypes, myths, and excuses. Published research, the testimony we gathered, and the sites we visited clearly show that something can be done about Hispanic dropout. The nation's task is to ensure that what works for Hispanic excellence in education is not confined to isolated research studies or limited to a few lighthouse programs.

Each of the following sections focuses on the role of key actors in solving the problem of Hispanic student dropout: the students themselves; their parents and families; their teachers; schools; policymakers at the district, state, and federal levels; and business and the extended community. Each section also discusses the excuses commonly used to justify inaction and the ways that our findings contradict the myths on which the excuses are based. We end each section with a list of recommendations for that actor.

Change for the better can begin with the actions of any adult player. But the actions of all the players must work in concert to produce a move forward, to support change in other arenas, and to achieve longer lasting and more extensive improvements in Hispanic dropout rates than can be achieved through solitary action.

HISPANIC STUDENTS

"People need to respect and like children. I have seen teachers say things to kids that no one should have to put up with." Speaker at HDP public hearings, San Diego

Hispanic students deserve to be treated as if they matter—as if they have abilities and talents to contribute to our society and as if they can be responsible for achieving excellence given the chance to do so. The Hispanic Dropout Project has two major findings and recommendations involving Hispanic students:

- Schools and their staffs must connect themselves to Hispanic students and their families, provide Hispanic students with a quality education based on high standards, and provide backup options to move past obstacles on the way to achieving those high standards.

- Students and their families deserve respect. In order to accomplish the first goal, schools, their personnel, policy stakeholders, and the larger society must have respect for these children. In many cases, this means fundamentally changing people's conceptions of Hispanic students and their families. This country's Hispanic students are *ours* and they are *smart*. Hispanic families have social capital on which to build. Hispanic students deserve meaningful opportunities to learn and to succeed in later life. They deserve support in school.

"They treat you with respect here. They talk with you individually. Not just about school, but what's on your mind. I get respect from the tutors. I get it and try to give it back." Student in an alternative placement program, Las Cruces

To think of and portray Hispanic students as poor things who cannot achieve—as "pobrecitos"—is patronizing and wrong. Treating students and their families as deviant or deficient blames the victim and just doesn't work. Neither belief is correct or helpful in designing programs and intervention strategies.

"The respect and value in which students were held was [sic] extremely important in separating the schools with low Latino dropout rates from those with high rates." In Rodriguez, C. E. (1992). *Student voices: High school students' perspectives on the Latino dropout problem* (Report to the Latino Commission on Educational Reform, p. 79). New York: Fordham University.

Some stereotypes that have been used to blame Hispanic students for dropping out of school suggest that they do not care about school, do not want to learn, do not come to school ready to learn, use drugs, belong to gangs, engage in violence, cannot achieve, have cultural backgrounds that are incompatible with schools, do not know English, are illegal immigrants, and in general, do not merit help or to be taken seriously. Alternative stereotypes portray Hispanic students as victims who, unable to do much about their conditions, cannot help but drop out of school.

According to the these latter myths, Hispanic students can do little or nothing about their education because they are poor, are the children of drug users, are victims of violence and abuse, do not speak (read or write) English well, encounter cultural barriers in school or in the larger society, or, through no fault of their own, lack some essential ingredient for success.

"My life, my heritage has been a cycle of poverty, of goals that were never achieved. I want to break that cycle. I want to achieve for my family, so that my parents can be proud of me." Student at HDP student leaders forum, New York City

Contrary to both sorts of myths, the vast majority of Hispanic students want to learn. They value education and try hard to do well in school. As is the case for the larger society, there are a small number of Hispanic youth who engage in antisocial behaviors. We do not condone such behaviors: If such youth are to succeed not only in school, but also later in life, they must change, and we must help them to change.

"I want to be a change agent. Things don't have to be like these stereotypes." Student at HDP student leaders forum, New York City

On the other hand, beliefs that paint Hispanics, en masse, as social misfits say more about how whole groups of people can be stereotyped in our society than they do about the vast majority of individuals within those groups. The Hispanic students (and their families) whom we encountered did not give up in the face of the barriers rooted in personal and institutional forms of bias and outright racism that they encounter. Instead, they worked hard to overcome those barriers.

"A persistent theme. . .is the observation that our educational system requires failure of some in order to assure success for others. . . . We spend enormous amounts of money and time locating children that we perceive as predestined for failure, often because they do not meet the expectations of the cultural patterns of the mainstream." In Trueba, H. T., Spindler, G., & Spindler, L. (Eds.) (1989). *What do anthropologists have to say about dropouts?* (pp. 2-3) New York: The Falmer Press.

Stereotypes hold that much should not be expected of Hispanic children, as if providing them with challenging opportunities to achieve educational excellence will only drive them out of school in increasing numbers. Quite the contrary: The Hispanic Dropout Project found that Hispanic students are most likely to learn when curricular content is challenging and meaningful. In visits to early childhood, elementary, and alternative high school programs, we observed that Hispanic students were very engaged when working with such content.

In our visits to less effective schools, many older students complained about being bored and not challenged in their classes. They complained of dull, dumbed down, and irrelevant curricula. The clear message they had internalized was one of low expectations, worsened by unpleasant, adverse physical circumstances and overcrowded classrooms. Students and dropouts alike com-

plained that they could not ask questions and get them answered in class, leading them to believe that their teachers did not really care about them.

"Perhaps the most important step in fostering adolescent development and achievement is the improvement of education. ... Changes in policy are important only if they contribute to more effective school and classroom environments in which students are strongly motivated to work hard at challenging learning tasks." In Panel on High-Risk Youth, National Research Council. (1993). *Losing generations: Adolescents in high-risk settings* (p. 205). Washington, DC: National Academy Press

The existence of such schools and classrooms raises the question: Why would *any rational person* stay in such a setting? Students' reports to the Hispanic Dropout Project and our own observations during site visits corroborate what is reported in the research on tracking and on the instructional quality of lower tracks—that is, the everyday in-school experiences of too many Hispanic students fail to engage their minds. In contrast to their criticisms of their secondary schools, many students interviewed by the Hispanic Dropout Project praised volunteers and teachers in their schools and in alternative placements who made course work relevant to their lives and, thereby, compelling enough to make them want to achieve.

"What is there to hope for? If I get out of school, what kind of a job will I get?" Speaker at HDP hearings, San Antonio

Students often complete high school because it promises opportunities—such as a good job, a military career, or postsecondary education. For too many Hispanic students, these futures don't look like realistic options. Hispanic high school students look around themselves only to see that their siblings and older friends who just graduated are earning less than their classmates who dropped out and have been working a couple of years. Many Hispanic students often need to contribute materially to their families, and this need for a paycheck often causes even successful students to respond to daily crises rather than to maintain a future orientation. If students need jobs to meet their responsibilities, schools should help them get part-time job placements and work with businesses to develop effective schedules and learning opportunities that help students, their employers, and the schools. The workplace, in its turn, needs to change from being a threat to a student's learning and finishing school to being an effective part of a high-quality education for a non-traditional student.

"In general, there appears to be a powerful economic incentive for students to finish high school. But is this economic incentive similar for Hispanics and Chicanos as for Whites and other groups? Recent data suggest that the answer may be no...unemployment rates in October 1985 for White youths who dropped out of high school during the 1984-85 school year were almost twice as high as for high school graduates from the year before who were not enrolled in college. But for Hispanics, dropouts had an unemployment rate only slightly higher than high school graduates." In Rumberger, R. (1991). *Chicano dropouts: A review of*

research and policy issues. In R. Valencia (Ed.), *Chicano school failure and success: Research and policy agendas for the 1990s* (p. 77). Philadelphia: Falmer Press.

The point is that schools and adults can help students envision better lives, help open options, and provide the connections that strengthen learning and build futures that work. To achieve these goals, the Hispanic Dropout Project—based on our observations and research review—recommends the following minimum set of guarantees for students:

1. ***Each individual Hispanic student should have someone who understands how schools work and who is willing to take personal responsibility for ensuring that the student makes it in and through school.***

Hispanic students who stayed in school (despite peer pressure, economic pressure, and other factors that pushed out many of their friends) often pointed to someone in that school—a teacher, coach, some other school staff member, someone from the larger community—whose personal interest in their finishing school nurtured their individual sense of self-worth and supported their efforts to stay in school.

"Students often say that one significant person took an interest in them." Testimony at HDP open forum, Las Cruces

2. ***Hispanic students should receive a high-quality education that guarantees that all students leave third grade able to read. They should experience curricula that are relevant and interesting, convey high expectations, and demand student investment in learning. They should understand the options that are available to them so that they can make informed decisions about their lives. They should be able to envision their futures with confidence based on an education that provided them with the tools needed to make their visions into reality.***

"The first task should be to determine what kinds of education and training would be appropriate in terms of enhancing their ability to live productive lives within this society. . . . Some of the successful dropouts designed their own curriculum: they enrolled in a training program for mechanics, got on-the-job training in supervising others, took a full-time job in a hosiery mill, but found time to complete a GED. For these subjects, the "school" they created for themselves could tolerate them and they could tolerate the intellectual and attitudinal discipline. One challenge is for schools to create opportunities within the context of the standard curriculum...The second and related comment concerns the school and behavioral problems cited by the dropouts themselves. They typically attribute leaving school to specific difficulties they had with the standard curriculum and/or school restrictions." In Cairns, R. B., & Cairns, B. D. (1994). *Lifelines and risks: Pathways of youth in our time* (p. 186). New York: Cambridge University Press.

Junior high school is too late to *begin* dropout prevention efforts. Successful experiences must begin in the early grades and continue throughout Hispanic students' schooling. On the other hand, early interventions, *by themselves*, are not enough. Later efforts should build on the successes of early interventions.

> *"The national investment in Head Start and other early intervention programs, while laudatory, constitutes only a first step in the solution."* In Cairns, R. B., & Cairns, B. D. (1994). *Lifelines and risks: Pathways of youth in our time* (p. 193). New York: Cambridge University Press.

Older students who had dropped out of school often thought that they had no other choice. School personnel either did not know about or did not tell students about alternative programs because of fiscal pressures to remain quiet about those programs. A former dropout quit his original school because, as he starkly put it, "It was either school or dropping out." He entered an alternative school only because a friend told him about it.

> *"Interventions must be intensive, comprehensive, coordinated and sustained. Anything less is naive and will show only marginal results. There is no 'cure all' or 'fix the kid' phenomenon. ... When special intervention is stopped before high school graduation, one can expect high-risk youth who have become successful to once again be at risk for school failure and drop out."* In Larson, K., & Rumberger, R. (1995). *ALAS, Achievement for Latinos through academic success* (Dropout prevention and intervention project targeting middle school youth with learning disabilities and emotional/behavioral disorders at risk for dropping out of school. Project evaluation: 1990-1995), p. A67.

A former dropout stated that one reason many Hispanics leave school is that they believe that the American dream is for someone else, not for them. The effective dropout interventions that we reviewed included all students in that dream. They provided Hispanic students chances to meet and talk with Hispanic college students and successful Hispanics, and to visit college campuses. Successful interventions also helped students to plan for life after high school in work, the military, or continuing education.

Hispanic youth need to be coached, not rescued. They should be able to take credit for what they achieve. They need encouragement and opportunities to take responsibility for their learning and later lives, to set long-range, real-life goals, and to take the steps needed to achieve those goals. Adults who advocate for students, who encourage students to dream about their futures, who mentor students on how to achieve those dreams, and who hold students accountable for their actions can provide needed support for students to make their dreams come true.

3. Schools should be responsive to the behaviors and needs of individual children. They should target Hispanic students for pro-social roles.

When respect, responsibility, membership, and opportunities for leadership are denied to students by their schools, then gangs and antisocial behaviors often fill the gap. The most effective schools that we visited gave students opportunities to assume important roles in school and in helping other students. They expected and often received the best from their Hispanic students. Effective schools also realize that real students have real problems; and hence, they provide flexibility, support, and backup strategies to turn things around when problems arise. For children, schools and effective support networks can make an important difference.

"Explicit in good practice models is the recognition that young people, like all people, need to feel a sense of comfort and need to be offered a sense of autonomy in order to profit from program teachings and experiences. . . . Consistent demonstrations of caring and high expectations for young people are also a prerequisite. Many programs are also providing young people with choice and 'voice' regarding program operation, and, in response to the racial and ethnic diversity of adolescents, many practitioners incorporate cultural traditions and values into programs." In Panel on High-Risk Youth, National Research Council. (1993). *Losing generations: Adolescents in high-risk settings* (p. 219). Washington, DC: National Academy Press.

4. ***Hispanic students have the right to schools and classrooms that are safe, healthy, free from intimidation, and inviting—that is, where their language and culture are treated as resources.***

National statistics show that many Hispanic students attend some of the most dangerous schools in America. Schools should provide students with positive and appealing alternatives to joining gangs or engaging in other antisocial behaviors. What is more, school should be a place where a student's language and cultural backgrounds are treated with respect.

"I would have been worse off if I had stayed in school. Others have dropped out to try to help their own futures." Testimony at HDP forum, Albuquerque

5. ***Hispanics' schools should have the resources necessary to provide safe environments and a high-quality education.***

Troubled schools lack basic resources. From fights breaking out due to jostling in overcrowded halls, to filthy restrooms, to long-ignored fire hazards, the basic infrastructure for effective schooling is too often missing from the schools attended by Hispanic students. Outdated textbooks, laughable lab facilities, antiquated libraries, and the absence of a challenging academic curriculum and the requisite instructional resources all bear the implicit message that these children just don't count. America cannot afford this.

"In Maryland, for instance, the one inner-city district (Baltimore) and five rural districts each spend less than $4,500 per student, compared with three suburban districts that spend $6,000-$7,500 per student. Thus, schools in the poorer Mary-

land districts have about $45,000-$60,000 less each year for each classroom of 30 students than schools in affluent districts. Per pupil expenditures directly affect the availability of textbooks, laboratory equipment, resource rooms, library books, and a range of other educational resources. . . . In one national survey, for example, in districts with more than one-third of the students from families below the poverty line, 59 percent of fourth grade teachers reported a lack of resources, compared with 16 percent in districts with no students below the poverty line." In Panel on High-Risk Youth, National Research Council. (1993). *Losing generations: Adolescents in high-risk settings* (pp. 106-107). Washington, DC: National Academy Press.

PARENTS AND FAMILIES

Hispanic parents and families are frequently perceived as being indifferent to their children's education, moving too frequently, not speaking or wanting to learn how to speak (read, or write) English, and being too undereducated to properly educate their children. Likewise, parents and families are often portrayed as victims unable to do anything about the racism they experience and unable to understand American cultural norms. Parents are said to be ignorant, poor, products of bad schools, in conflict with their children, and in general, culturally deprived.

The schools that we saw working effectively with Hispanic parents prove that these stereotypes and descriptions are wrong. Our observations are backed up by the testimony of countless parents, both individually and through the community-based organizations they participated in, and by the extensive research on the importance of effective parent involvement. Large-scale national studies and targeted research show that, contrary to stereotypes, Hispanic parents and families highly value learning and seek to effectively support their children in school. What students told us reinforced the research.

> *"There were deep chasms in the relationship and communication between school and home. School personnel had many negative misconceptions about the motivations and values of parents. There was widespread belief that parents did not sufficiently value education and that they were unwilling to give sufficient time to rearing their children and participating in school activities. On the other hand, we found most parents to be fearful and alienated from school authorities while at the same time assigning expertise and responsibility to school personnel for educating their children. However, when parents were approached with a genuine desire to serve them and their family, we found that almost all parents were exceedingly open to suggestion and to becoming more involved in directing their adolescent and monitoring school performance.* **Parents, far more than school or community personnel, were willing to implement suggestions from project researchers."** In Larson, K., & Rumberger, R. (1995). *ALAS, Achievement for Latinos through academic success* (Dropout prevention and intervention project targeting middle school youth with learning disabilities and emotional/behavioral disorders at risk for dropping out of school. Project evaluation: 1990-1995), p. A66 (emphasis added).

Hispanic students, whether they stayed in school or had dropped out and then returned, almost unanimously reported that they wanted to "make it" as a way to thank their parents and families for the sacrifices that they had made on the students' behalf. These students wanted to make their parents proud of them. They wanted to better themselves and did not want to disappoint their parents by quitting school. In addition, one-time dropouts spoke about their parents' disappointment in them as well as the love, support, pressure, and encouragement that they received from their parents at first to stay in school, then to return to school, and always to try hard and to learn.

The Hispanic Dropout Project's hearings were attended by Hispanic parents who were anxious about their children's educational futures. Many of them had found out about the hearings by word of mouth. Their testimony demonstrated their readiness to be involved in their children's education.

"Many high-risk children and their parents are blamed and not treated with respect by educators. Highest risk students and their parents are very responsive to genuine and meaningful offers of help despite cultural, language, and economic barriers." In Larson, K., & Rumberger, R. (1995). *ALAS, Achievement for Latinos through academic success* (Dropout prevention and intervention project targeting middle school youth with learning disabilities and emotional/behavioral disorders at risk for dropping out of school. Project evaluation: 1990-1995), p. A69.

Parents said that, in order to be involved, they must often overcome school resistance and hostility to that involvement. At almost every site that we visited, Hispanic parents said that their children's schools did not take them or their concerns very seriously. One mother recounted being told of her child's suspension hearing just 30 minutes before it was held. Risking her job, she rushed to the school, only to wait all morning in the school office and to be told abruptly that the meeting had been postponed. One father did, in fact, lose his job because of the time he spent trying to keep his daughter from being, in his words, pushed out. Another mother, in flawless English, reported how her child's principal would not speak directly to her, supposedly because her accent made it too difficult for school personnel to understand her.

"Schools also differ on the extent to which parents are involved in school decision making, conferences with teachers, and home-school instructional programs. Over the past decade, studies consistently demonstrate the positive effects of such programs on student achievement, yet parents from low-income neighborhoods, especially racial and ethnic minorities, are least likely to participate. The reasons for this lack of participation include not only the lack of funds, but also different levels of school commitment, cultural and language barriers, and time constraints and stress on poor working families." In Panel on High-Risk Youth, National Research Council. (1993). *Losing generations: Adolescents in high-risk settings* (p. 108). Washington, DC: National Academy Press.

Although community groups and activists expressed anger—sometimes bordering on rage—at how schools treat parents, they also expressed determination to press on with their efforts to ensure that parental concerns would be heard. What is more, parents found help and strength by joining and working with such groups.

Hispanic parents spoke eloquently about their dreams and wishes for their children's futures, and the roles that schools must play in educating their children. In a Head Start program, in community and recreation centers that provided social services for students, and in community action groups—all visited by the Hispanic Dropout Project—parents volunteered as tutors, instructional assistants, fundraisers, program implementers, and in many other roles.

2. ***Schools should recruit Hispanic parents and extended families into a genuine partnership of equals for educating Hispanic students.***

The most impressive schools visited by the Hispanic Dropout Project aggressively recruited parents to work with them in educating their children. Parent roles were authentic and appropriate. For instance, school personnel helped graduating students and their parents to understand and to fill out various financial aid forms for college. At the same school, parents whose children engaged in inappropriate behaviors were helped to recognize how their own behaviors enabled their children to avoid responsibility. When those parents knew what to look for, they monitored their children's behaviors and held them accountable for avoiding antisocial activities and for getting to school on time. These parents' behaviors show that they understood that their advocacy for their children and their partnership with the school continued at home by the parents' fulfilling their side of the bargain.

Conversely, schools that were less successful or seemed to be actively pushing students out were also those schools which, by their messages and practices, seemed to actively blame parents and families for their children's failures. Parents bitterly complained about such schools.

"The bottom line: the local school board and local power brokers should not disenfranchise parents. They should give them the power to run their schools for their neighborhoods." Testimony at HDP hearings, San Diego

3. ***Hispanic parents should be helped to envision a future for their children and a reasonable means by which to plan for and achieve that future.***

One of the most powerful incentives mentioned by Hispanic students was their parents' and families' determination that these students have better lives than the older generation had. Parents want better lives for their children; schools should help parents learn what is available for their children and help parents provide these opportunities for their children. That parents can motivate their children and that schools can provide information about opportunities for students should provide the basis for the aforementioned partnership.

"My mom was always supportive of me. She pushed me to go to school. She wouldn't let me stay home. So, I ditched. Finally, she saw the problem and took me out of the school. But she pushed me to go to another school until this place [an alternative school setting] helped me to graduate." Former dropout at HDP open forum, Albuquerque

TEACHERS

Teachers and other school staff can and must make a difference in students' lives. In spite of this imperative, many teachers feel powerless. Excuses such as "The problem is too big for one teacher. How can I, a single teacher, hope to overcome the effects of students' backgrounds?" are common. This particular excuse portrays teachers as helpless when dealing with students who are not ready or do not want to learn. Hispanic students are said to lack something (usually English); their aspirations or those of their parents are said not to support schooling.

"Teachers only want to teach from 8:00 to 3:00. They just follow the contract." Testimony at HDP student leader meeting, New York City

Teachers' overcrowded classrooms are said to be the reason that they can attend to just so many students. Hence, a type of academic triage results: Some students must be sacrificed so that others can be taught. Not surprisingly, those who are sacrificed are portrayed as uneducable.

"There is no support from teachers for the students. Teachers don't believe in the students. One of the main problems I saw in high school is that teachers don't want to pay attention." Student in alternative placement, Las Cruces

On the other hand, Hispanic students at project hearings across the country leveled the most damning charge possible against some of their teachers: "They just don't care."

Neither extreme is the rule. During Hispanic Dropout Project open hearings and visits to schools, we encountered many teachers who made a difference in their students' lives. These caring individuals were trying their hardest to help Hispanic students succeed. Some had developed teaching practices designed to engage their students. Others provided counseling and mentored students. All constantly worked to improve how they taught their students. All communicated a deep sense of caring, high expectations, respect, and commitment to their students.

"I saw how teachers invested in me. I felt like a person. The teachers' personal investment in me meant so much to me." Testimony at HDP student leader meeting, New York City

Excellent teachers are very aware of the challenges that their students face. They are very realistic about students' individual situations. What seemed to distinguish teachers who made a difference from those who did not was that the former teachers used knowledge of Hispanic students' academic, social, and psychological characteristics as a foundation and a source of competence on which to build. These teachers passionately believed that, because of their teaching and personal concern for their students, they made a difference in their students' lives. Students and parents agreed.

"I got to know them [personnel at an alternative setting] as family. They showed

me different things that I could do besides drop out. So I went back to school and finished in three years." Former dropout at HDP public forum, Albuquerque

Students reported that teachers who really cared about them as individuals often provided them with the inspiration and personal support needed to get through hard times. When asked why they stayed in school, students (many with friends who had dropped out of school) pointed to a teacher or other school person as having taken a special interest in them and nurtured their dreams for the future.

Less successful teachers do not really understand their Hispanic students' lives. They do not use what they know about their students as a foundation on which to build. Instead, they use what they know about their students to explain away failure.

"The school staff was extremely resistant to change and to being challenged by change. School problems were perceived to be caused by deficiencies on the part of students and parents. The need for fundamental change was believed to reside within students and parents." In Larson, K., & Rumberger, R. (1995). *ALAS, Achievement for Latinos through academic success* (Dropout prevention and intervention project targeting middle school youth with learning disabilities and emotional/behavioral disorders at risk for dropping out of school. Project evaluation: 1990-1995), pp. A65-A66.

Students know the difference and respond positively to the good teachers that they encounter. Instead of scurrying out of class as soon the bell's ringing marked its end, students with effective teachers would stay to ask a question, to discuss a new insight about the day's work, or simply to share something that had happened outside of school with the teacher. We saw such student behaviors in secondary mathematics classes, in alternative school settings, and with middle-school generalist teachers.

"Even when a school was not particularly sensitive to Latino cultural differences — as was the case at School B — the critical difference was whether the school's staff thought the student was worth teaching." In Rodriguez, C. E. (1992). *Student voices: High school students' perspectives on the Latino dropout problem* (p. 79). (Report to the Latino Commission on Educational Reform). New York: Fordham University.

Hispanic students and their parents expect teachers to engage students in challenging content. In contrast to their complaints about low tracks, low expectations, and dumbed-down, boring and irrelevant curricula, Hispanic students and their parents who were interviewed by the project praised teachers who made material interesting and relevant. The students craved being challenged by their teachers.

"At School D, students would begin by hiring teachers who care and by making classes more fun. They would remove a large number of the faculty and replace

them with teachers who are patient and interested in the needs of all the students, not only a select few. Importantly, they would provide the school with more bilingual teachers." In Rodriguez, C. E. (1992). *Student voices: High school students' perspectives on the Latino dropout problem* (p. 86). (Report to the Latino Commission on Educational Reform). New York: Fordham University.

Students expected teachers to help them with the subject matter. Many students complained about not getting help when they needed it and, as a result, becoming frustrated. They talked about raising their hands or calling for help during class but not getting assistance because the teacher was busy with someone else. Students realized that large class size and the fact that secondary teachers teach many courses militate against teachers being able to help them.

Teachers may send unintentional messages to students when they fail to respond directly to requests for help. Some students interviewed by the project, for instance, reported that their teachers suggested that they get academic help from a tutoring service which met during breaks and after-school. Such help is too little and too late for a student who, because of frustration, has given up trying to understand. To the student who recounted that "My teacher told me she was too busy and that I should get help from the school's tutoring service," the teacher had simply dismissed her request.

"Student preferences are viewed by school staff as non-essentials, which contributes to student alienation." In Larson, K., & Rumberger, R. (1995). *ALAS, Achievement for Latinos through academic success* (Dropout prevention and intervention project targeting middle school youth with learning disabilities and emotional/behavioral disorders at risk for dropping out of school. Project evaluation: 1990-1995), p. A68.

When asked about the features of alternative schools or programs that they most appreciated, almost every student pointed to the personalized relationships that they developed with their teachers and the individualized attention that they received. Many students realized that this attention was possible because of the smaller class size. These students also spoke about the mutual respect and caring that developed between themselves and the schools' staffs. This respect was communicated to the students in countless ways by adults who provided mentoring. A volunteer at a social service agency would tell students that, like them, he too had dropped out of school but had later achieved his goals by believing in himself and being persistent. A retired teacher insisted that all of her students could learn to read, and she provided them with the support to do so.

"Many disadvantaged youth feel ignored or unimportant in school—as if no one at school cares about them. . . . [Intervention] efforts [typically] rely upon three broad strategies: (1) strategies to link students to adults in the school, including mentor programs and efforts to reorganize school schedules to promote closer contact between teachers and students; (2) strategies to link students to other students in the school, including extracurricular activities and orientation pro-

grams; and (3) strategies to link students to the school as an institution, including fair and equitable policies and greater student choice over their school programs." In Natriello, G., McDill, E. L., & Pallas, A. M. (1990). *Schooling disadvantaged children: Racing against catastrophe* (p. 136). New York: Teachers College Press.

1. ***Teachers should teach content so that it interests and challenges Hispanic students. They should help students to learn that content. They should communicate high expectations, respect, and interest in each of their students. They should understand the roles of language, race, culture, and gender in schooling. They should engage parents and the community in the education of their children.***

Effective instruction requires knowing the student and tapping into her or his strengths and interests to trigger learning. Effective teachers use parents as allies to extend learning outside the classroom. They provide parents with a stream of timely feedback and help parents see concrete ways of extending their children's learning outside the classroom. Teachers who are not familiar with the lives of their students, their words, and their backgrounds find it hard to be highly effective.

"Make class interesting." Testimony at HDP student leader meeting, New York City

As project members have seen, under schoolhouse pressures, harried teachers may find themselves unintentionally sending the wrong message. Teachers need to monitor themselves or receive inservice training to ensure that Hispanic students and their families receive the message that they are really wanted in the classroom and in school, that excellence is within their reach, and that success depends on working together.

2. ***Teachers should become knowledgeable about and develop strategies to educate Hispanic students and to communicate with their parents. Teachers should receive the professional development needed to develop those attitudes, knowledge, and skills.***

Ongoing professional development should help teachers learn about their students' backgrounds and interests, curriculum adaptation, and other instructional strategies for heterogenous student populations. Teachers should be familiar with the implications of second language acquisition for student learning and how to adapt instruction for students of varying levels of English language proficiency. Teachers' knowledge of their students' cultural heritage and the implications of language loss are important for effective teaching and the creation of well-functioning home–school linkages.

"Teachers were asked to organize their classrooms into small groups which eventually became cohesive work teams with full control of their own writing activities. They would explore possible topics, research them, develop data gathering instruments such as surveys and interview protocols, conduct interviews with peers and adults, discuss findings and finally write cooperatively extended

and complex essays. The students discovered that writing was no longer a futile school exercise designed by teachers for their own purposes, but a meaningful activity and a means of exchanging important ideas and specific audiences and for expressing their own feelings. Students realized that their individual and collective voices can make a difference in public opinion and in the quality of life at school. Thus Chicano high school students not only significantly sharpened their communicative skills but realized that these skills are a powerful instrument in voicing individual and collective concerns. Teachers would often express their surprise: 'I am impressed. Look!', they said as they shared their students' compositions. A teacher wrote in her diary: 'This [the unexpected high performance of students] was a very successful lesson for me in many ways. It furthers my belief that if what is taught is important in the mind of the learner, much more will truly be learned.'" In Trueba, H. T., Spindler, G., & Spindler, L. (Eds.) (1989). *What do anthropologists have to say about dropouts?* (p. 34) New York: The Falmer Press.

Often, teachers in high-poverty schools are the last to receive high-quality professional development on new instructional approaches, curricula, and unbiased ways of assessing students. They should be the first to get these opportunities.

"Why should I want to be a teacher? Look at the conditions we're taught in."
Testimony at HDP student leader meeting, New York City